

2007 Review of Books

Previously: [2006](#)

This year I only read 70 books, down from over 120 last year. I guess that's not too bad considering this was the Year of Other People — I still beat my general goal of 52. Once again, here are the books that struck me as completely worth reading. This year, though, I've intermixed them with the other books I read:

The original *Nickelode and Dimed*, Orwell lives as a plonguer and a tramp in Paris and London respectively. The descriptions of such poor conditions are typically riveting and a great deal of fascinating reflection is included throughout.

Hugh Laurie, the British actor (Americans know him as Gregory House, M.D.), takes his first crack at writing in this comic novel. (The novel was originally sent to publishers under a pseudonym to avoid celebrity favoritism, but naturally sales forced him to publish it under his real name.) The plot is a fairly standard spy-guns thriller, although very well executed, but the book's brilliance is the way it adeptly undermines its own cliched language, to hilarious effect. In that way it's a lot like the British TV comedy *People Like Us* (itself well worth seeing). A good, fun read.

This book combines, in abbreviated form, the arguments in all of Searle's work up to the time of its publication (which is basically everything except *Rationality in Action*). In doing so, it basically has all the hallmarks of Searle's work, only more so: a clear exposition of complex philosophical ideas that demonstrates how to think better, useful tools to help you understand your world better, and genuine philosophical solutions that let you resolve confusions you may have had before. And all of it is done with Searle's customary wit and style — almost an anti-style, like that of D. J. Bernstein, in which he simply explains things clearly and concisely. A model of public philosophy.

A strong, fun novel, packed with interesting ideas and characters and gimmicks, telling the story of people I love to read about: jetsetting academics. I'm normally not one for novels, but I have to admit it: Lodge makes it work. My only caveat is that this is part of a trilogy and one should probably read the first book, *Changing Places*, first, since later books refer back.

Short, meaningful, and elegant. More than you could reasonably expect from such a book.

Including this is not quite right, because I cannot actually recommend this book without reservation. Alinsky is an anecdotalist, not a writer, and the first half of the book drags as he forces himself to come up with some general platitudes and lecture the youth of today. The second half, however, is incredibly fun and gives you an excitement and energy about accomplishing things with power politics that you just can't get anywhere else.

Sadly, there aren't any good alternatives I can recommend. Alinsky's biography, *Let Them Call Me Rebel* by Sanford Horwitt, is quite good but has a few serious failings. First, it drags a great deal in the middle between the beginning of Alinsky's career, in which he worked for Al Capone as research for his University of Chicago sociology dissertation, and the end, when he organized the black neighborhoods of Chicago and Rochester to fight the white establishment. During these middle years, Alinsky didn't do much except watch three wives get sick and die and the book spends several hundred pages watching it happen. (Also, frustratingly, the book seems to be exhausted by the time it gets to the interesting end part and covers it in less detail than one would like.) Furthermore, the biographer apparently has come to severely disapprove of his subject, especially his habit of exaggerating or inventing stories about himself, that his disapproving tone takes all the fun out of the action.

Another possible alternative is Michael Gecan's *Going Public*. Gecan is one of the top people in the Industrial Areas Foundation, the foundation Alinsky started and ran for most his life. *Going Public* is his attempt to go back to writing (apparently his college career) and tell the stories of the battles he fought as an IAF organizer. Gecan has much more of a flair for writing than Alinsky, but never got the chance to develop his editing skill, and the result is an uneven, sometimes overwritten, book. Also, Gecan's IAF is much more watered down than Alinsky's ever was and some of his tactics just seem downright silly.

There's also Alinsky's first book, *Reveille for Radicals*, but this can be dismissed as coming out during the early part of career, before some of the most fun stuff. So, because of the extreme importance it had on this year and because I have no serious alternatives, I have to recommend *Rules for Radicals*, along with everyone else.

I read this entire novel in one sitting and it touched me in a profound way. It asks what it means to dedicate your life to writing, by looking at four people who come together, each of which has taken a different position in the New York intellectual scene. It's also recently out as a film, which is a very bizarre experience to watch, because the book takes place almost entirely in the characters' heads while the film will have none of that and only shows the brute actions. I'm not sure other people will have the same experience I did, but as a writer I found this book very powerful. By the same token, I'm looking forward to this year's [*All the Sad Young Literary Men*](#) (and gleefully downing the new issue of [*n+1*](#)).

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